

BEHIND BEVIN'S HOSTILITY TO ISRAEL

Britain is Not Yet Reconciled to the Realities

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“WHAT now confronts us is the task of readjusting our Middle Eastern policy to the new realities. It is not possible just to recognize Israel and for the rest, go on as before. With the establishment of this new state there now exists in the Middle East a community possessing all the modern techniques of production. It cannot fail to have some influence on the affairs of the whole area. We have been accustomed to regarding Jews and Arabs as competitors for a little plot of land, with ourselves as the arbitrators. It would have been more far-sighted to see Jews and British as competitors for the role of chief agent of the industrial revolution in the Middle East. Only if this competition can be turned into cooperation is there a prospect of long-term stability in that vital region. To bring about such cooperation demands more than a change of policy in the Cabinet. It demands a fundamental change of approach by all concerned.”

These remarkable words were not uttered in the recent stormy House of Commons debate on Palestine. They appeared in a brief and inconspicuous editorial note pub-

BRITAIN'S recognition of Israel formally marked an important stage in the strained relations between the ex-mandatory and the ex-mandate: but did it indicate a real change in these relations or in the bewildering attitudes of their chief architect, Foreign Secretary Bevin? GEORGE LICHTHEIM here examines the development of British-Israeli relations as they have been recently exposed on the public stage of Parliament and in the forums of the influential daily and periodical press, where British policy in Palestine is now undergoing searching examination and analysis. Mr. Lichtheim is London correspondent for a number of Israeli publications. His most recent article in COMMENTARY was "Europe's Democracy and 'American Imperialism,'" in the January issue.

lished by the liberal Sunday newspaper, the *Observer*, on January 23, a week after this important journal had delivered a double-barrelled blast against the "evil and foolish policy" pursued by the Foreign Secretary. Everyone read and remarked upon this unusual double-column editorial, which climaxed the press campaign against Mr. Bevin. Few paid attention to the constructive suggestion contained in the lines quoted. Certainly the Foreign Secretary was not among those who did. His now notorious opening speech in the debate of January 26—and still more the remarks he dropped in the semi-privacy of a Labor party parliamentary meeting earlier on the same day—convinced his hearers that any such "fundamental change of approach" will not occur while he is in control of the Foreign Office and while other key departments are held by colleagues or subordinates who disagree with him only in matters of detail.

The formal recognition of Israel has made little change. A graceless gesture, extracted from the government at the pistol point of parliamentary rebellion and commonwealth pressure, its moral value was dissipated in advance by the attitude displayed by Mr. Bevin on the last occasion when, in Mr. Crossman's phrase, he might have "won back everything with the last penny."

British *de facto* recognition was to have been flourished as a bargaining counter during the negotiations over Israel's frontiers—until the very last moment, in fact. Instead, the combined pressure of the United States, the Commonwealths of Australia and New Zealand, France, the Conservative opposition, and the critics in his own party compelled Mr. Bevin to surrender his trump card "without extracting . . . any guarantee that the matters outstanding will be dealt

with in the way most likely to ensure a lasting settlement," to cite the characteristic lament of the *Economist* (January 29). All Bevin has to show for his obstinacy is a slight temporary abatement of anti-British abuse in the Egyptian press, and the grudging toleration of the Pakistanis: a meager catch after so much expenditure on fish-bait.

IT WAS the recognition that British policy had failed to reap any of the promised benefits in the way of Arab good will that finally turned the Tories against Mr. Bevin. Their behavior during the dramatic House of Commons debate on January 26 mirrored both their attachment to the aims he has for so long pursued and their angry disappointment at his failure and the resulting damage to British prestige. In his brilliant closing speech, Mr. Oliver Stanley, the most accomplished debater on the Opposition side, converted their bitterness over the humiliation suffered by the Royal Air Force in the Sinai "incident," and their resentment against the United States and the UN for refusing to take the British side, into anger against the government and the Foreign Secretary. Carefully refraining from any remark calculated to embitter the pro-Arabs on the benches behind him, he concentrated on the government's responsibility for the long list of defeats and humiliations suffered by Britain in the Middle East since Mr. Bevin took over the Foreign Office. In a speech of only thirty-five minutes he cemented the unity of the ranks behind him and made the whole House feel that the Foreign Secretary was personally and uniquely responsible for the disaster that had befallen the country. But for this brilliant extempore performance, the Conservatives, many of whom had smarted under Winston Churchill's frank pro-Zionist speech earlier in the evening, would never have walked as a body into the "No" lobby.

Churchill's speech, one of his most devastating, was that of a lifelong Liberal temporarily at the head of the Tory party. He blasted not only Bevin's methods but his purpose—and was cheered by the Socialist

backbenchers as often as by his own followers. If Stanley solidified the Conservatives, Churchill helped to split the Labor ranks. Later in the debate, Kenneth Pickthorn, an independent Conservative, Member for Cambridge University and a veteran anti-Zionist, contributed his share to the Foreign Secretary's political decline by bluntly denouncing him as incompetent, incoherent, and generally unfit to hold his post, although "an almost infinitely better man than the one most canvassed as his possible successor." This remark caused some Socialists to comment that the shadow of Dalton was over the debate. And so it was.

But despite their lingering affection for the Foreign Secretary and their apprehension of worse to come if he were forced to resign, the Conservatives were left with no choice. Some of them might fear—as some of the Labor "rebels" certainly hoped—that if the government fell it would be succeeded by another Socialist administration under Morrison or Cripps, further to the Left and less likely to take the advice of the permanent officials. Others might dislike Churchill's pro-Zionism almost as much as the Labor left-wing resented Bevin's sullen hostility to Israel. But whatever their misgivings, they served notice on the Foreign Secretary that he no longer had their confidence.

Despite Attlee's charge of pre-electoral maneuvering, they were in fact obeying their principles rather than their interests. Anxious though many of them were to rid themselves of the carcass of dead policies, they could not have been unaware that in attacking Bevin on Palestine they were taking the unpopular side in terms of election politics. For not only is Bevin personally popular with almost every section of the electorate, but his Palestine policy was and is more popular with the ordinary voter than almost anything he has done elsewhere. More than that: because of Palestine, Bevin is strongest with precisely that section of the electorate which normally votes Conservative. It can be argued that this is just why the Tories have finally taken alarm and are beginning to attack him, lest his popularity

cost them the next election. But in the voting on January 26 they were simply reacting as representatives of the traditional governing class, goaded at long last beyond endurance by the spectacle of so much obstinacy and folly. (Some of the pro-Arab "young brigadiers" who served in the Middle East took the opportunity to maneuver themselves into the correct position, without dropping their anti-Zionist bias, by blaming the Foreign Secretary for the disaster that has befallen the Palestine Arabs).

The Tory semi-liberal big business wing, of which Churchill—despite a deceptive air of romantic die-hardism in his speeches and writings—is at bottom more representative than other Tory leaders, had had enough of Bevin's failure to win American support for his Palestine policy and disliked his constant sniping at Truman—another demagogic device that helps this pseudo-Palmerston with the electorate but induces alarm and irritation among the upper-middle class and is especially infuriating to the small but influential Liberal party, with its ramifications outside Parliament and its control of some of the most important daily and weekly journals in this country.

Lastly, the Labor left-wing revolted with something more than its expected strength. The result was a moral defeat that very nearly became a real one and kept the whips in a panic all evening until the vote was counted; after which everyone commented on Chamberlain and the Norway debate that brought him down.

YET in an important sense nothing has changed, nor is there any likelihood that anything will. The reason, as the *New Statesman* put it the next day in a brilliant editorial, is that Bevin's policy reflects both the sulky isolationism of the electorate and the defensive attitude of the governing class. The Tories revolted when Bevin's failure became unbearable, but they have nothing to put in place of his policy except better manners and an acuter sense of reality. The Arab League, after all, was glued together by Anthony Eden. And as for competing

with Israel "for the role of chief agent of the industrial revolution in the Middle East," the number of Conservative politicians who would welcome such a role can be counted on the fingers of one hand. It is true that the *Times*, in an important editorial written a week before the debate, pleaded for a new Middle Eastern policy based on Turkey and Israel rather than on the Arabs. But the *Times* is hardly a Conservative paper and many Tories regard it with distrust. In any case the new approach would have to be initiated by the Labor government—that is, by Bevin.

This is not a personal question. There are strong rumors that the Foreign Secretary has been cut down to size by his Cabinet colleagues and made to promise that in future his department will not act on its own. It is even suggested that the next Cabinet reshuffle may enable him to retire, with his Western Union and Atlantic Pact laurels intact, and that steps to this end are already being taken behind the scenes. Meanwhile the Foreign Office is evidently under orders to be polite to Israel and avoid any overt display of hostility. But all this is irrelevant. The real question is whether British policymakers will continue to regard Israel as an active nuisance and a potential Soviet satellite, or whether they will view it as a focus of Westernization. Something of a struggle is evidently going on between the two schools, but so far there is no sign that the Foreign Office—to say nothing of the defense departments—has modified its original approach.

The government's political and military advisers on Middle Eastern matters have swung round from contemptuous disbelief in the Jewish state's capacity for self-defense to alarm at its unexpected strength. The corollary of this alarm is a desire to impose Procrustean territorial limits upon Israel while building up as rapidly as possible a viable Arab coalition led by an enlarged Transjordan. Hence the persistent Anglo-American dispute over the final boundaries of Israel, in which the Americans, however hesitantly, are taking the opposite side out of

a mixture of motives, among which sentimental pro-Zionism is certainly not the strongest.

What is at stake in this dispute is the famous balance-of-power, for a powerful and growing Israel implies a whole nexus of relationships that Britain will find it difficult to control. From the British viewpoint any arrangement is bad that compels London to "balance" Israel, not merely against Transjordan, but against the Arab League in general. What the Foreign Office wants is a Jewish state just big enough to accommodate a few more immigrants, sharing its mineral wealth with Transjordan, and restricted to a strip of Mediterranean coastline—not a genuinely independent state with access to the Indian Ocean and room for another million people. Mr. Bevin's insistence that Israel must either renounce the Negev or surrender Western Galilee, Jaffa, and Acre, and must in any case let go the southern Negev with Aqaba, springs not simply from his dislike of Jews but from a very genuine fear that an Israel that escapes such truncation will not be easily controlled—by Britain.

IT is easy to see that a truncated Israel will be tempted to burst its bounds at the first opportunity, and this argument is in fact used by Mr. Bevin's critics, both publicly and in private. Presumably it is also being employed in Washington. But to point the dilemma is not necessarily to suggest a solution.

Clearly there is no problem involved for the United States: however important Israel becomes in relation to her neighbors, she will always remain amenable to American influence; indeed there is a sense in which Israel might become the spearhead of American penetration. But this argument is not applicable to Britain in quite the same way. The best London can hope for is to establish good relations with Israel, and against this must be set the certainty that the appearance of a new independent power in the Middle East means the end of the old political nexus based on Arab domination and British control over the Arabs. America can easily

manage any conceivable balance-of-power among the Middle Eastern countries. Britain can with difficulty control a congeries of states of which Israel is the least important. Hence if the Middle Eastern policy is to be based in future, as the *Times* has suggested, on the two modern countries—Turkey and Israel—rather than on the backward Arab states, the over-all control will have to become Anglo-American rather than purely British.

Mr. Bevin has repeatedly declared himself ready for an agreed Anglo-American solution. The chances are he believes what he says: a capacity for self-deception is not the least striking of his many personal traits. But there is nothing to suggest that he realizes what Anglo-American agreement really implies. For the last three years he has been trying to get American support for a purely British solution, and a reactionary one at that. According to the latest despatches he is still trying to obtain State Department backing for a somewhat modified version of the Bernadotte Plan. Meanwhile his representatives in the Middle East are knocking together yet another Arab coalition, this time based on the faithful Nuri-es-Said in Iraq and the ever loyal Abdullah of Transjordan. There is nothing in all this that suggests a departure from the old policy of backing the Arab "master nation" against the "minorities" and identifying British interests with the social predominance of the land-owning oligarchy and the merchant class—twin pillars of the pre-industrial order which must stand or fall together.

AGAINST this unpromising background, British complaints about Israel's "Eastern" orientation are sharply accentuated by the internal difficulties of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—the three Arab countries with a genuine "social problem." Every boatload of immigrants from Eastern Europe, every manifestation of pro-Sovietism on the part of the Socialist "Left" in Israel, underscores the complaint that Israel is "potentially" a Soviet satellite—although privately it is admitted that there are more Communists in Lebanon,

and better opportunities for them in almost any other Middle Eastern country.

In this propaganda there is undoubtedly an important element of deliberate goose-pimpling: witness the speed with which it was turned on and off during the January crisis, when the Foreign Office, the BBC, and the subservient section of the public press alternately raged against the Israeli "Reds" and praised the democratic character of the elections to the Constituent Assembly. (As one fairly well-informed Britisher said to this writer: "Naturally, when they saw that the Americans wouldn't buy it, they gave it up. What would you have done?") But there is also genuine nervousness among a caste of officials whose Oxford education and Roman Catholic or Anglo-Catholic backgrounds do not predispose them to a clear understanding of the difference between the various brands of modern socialism. For some of these people all East European Socialists are suspect, and since the Czech coup they have had some superficial warrant for their apprehensions. They may not seriously believe that there are Soviet officers in the Israeli air force, but they do believe that Israel will become a fertile field for Soviet propaganda. That most of the recent immigrants from Eastern Europe have been inoculated against Stalinism is a little more than they can grasp.

And even the more sober-minded among the government's advisers are worried by the spectacle of Soviet-American competition in a field so important to Britain. They recognize that American support of Israel has set up a powerful counter-attraction against whatever material and moral aid Israel received from the East during the critical months. They are aware that, given the choice, six out of seven Israelis would opt for the West, and that the dominant forces in the labor movement, the army, and the government are committed to a Western orientation. But again the question arises: can Britain afford to sponsor the growth and development of a state whose internal tensions reflect the current pattern of world politics? In the Middle East of all places?

In taking up this question, the above-mentioned *Times* editorial drew a distinction between modern countries like Turkey and Israel, "which have already had their revolution," and the Arab countries which have not. The conclusion is obvious and the article did not hesitate to draw it. But this type of reasoning is unfamiliar to British Conservatives, and *a fortiori* to Arabs, for whom "the revolution" has only one meaning. It amounts to saying that only democratic countries are safe for capitalism—a statement to which both Liberals and Marxists would agree. Certainly Turkey, since the Kemalist revolution, has become a good deal safer for investors, domestic and foreign, than it used to be under the Ottomans. One may also suspect that Egypt, which "has not had its revolution," is by comparison highly unsafe, and that the same applies to Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

Israel is, of course, quite safe despite (or because of) its powerful democratic-socialist labor movement. The fact that Communists are free to organize the remaining Arabs and that Mapam plays an important part in public life can be interpreted in various ways. Most people would regard it as a sign of strength, and point up the appropriate contrast with Egypt, where the government, harassed by the extreme Right and its terrorists, is also mortally afraid of the handful of Communists and suspicious of the mildest agitation for reform. This point of view has its supporters among Liberals and progressive Conservatives in Britain, and it is of course the prevailing opinion within the Labor party. One may hazard the guess that, with the help of some gentle prodding from Washington, this opinion will gradually translate itself into policy. But the change-over will not be easy, and the old arguments will crop up at every step. For to take an unromantic view of the Arabs is to question a good deal of the remaining Imperial *mystique*.

SOONER or later the British outlook will nonetheless have to be readjusted, especially if Mr. Bevin is unsuccessful in his

final attempt to integrate a diminutive Israel into a Middle East controlled by a handful of British officials in Cairo and Amman. When the curtain has descended on this abortive intrigue, the following position is likely to emerge:

1. Israel will be genuinely independent, predominantly Western, but careful to preserve official neutrality as between the two worlds. As the only genuinely modern, industrial, and democratic state in the Middle East, it will be a powerful focus of Western influence. Socially, it will represent modern social democracy and modern capitalism, both unknown in the Arab world. Militarily, it will be stronger than all its neighbors combined, with the single exception of Turkey.

2. The United States will increasingly regard the Jewish state as a cornerstone of its own Middle Eastern policy.

3. Britain will continue its traditional policy of defending Islamic interests and shielding the Arabs from the impact of the industrial revolution, but will not display hostility to the Jewish state.

On this reading of the situation, Mr. Bevin and the Foreign Office are still trying, not very successfully, to catch up with reality instead of molding it to their purpose. This reproach was repeatedly flung at them during the House of Commons debate, and with good reason. But it must be recognized that they had a difficult problem on their hands. Their reckless championship of the Arab states, at a time when the Arab armies were being thrashed by the improvised militia of Israel, had brought disaster on the Arabs and at the same time alienated Israel to such a degree that it became possible to speak of an anti-British bias on the part of the Israeli government and people. Having tried in its propaganda to class Israel among the nations behind the Iron Curtain, the Foreign Office had to climb down and admit its mistake in full view of public opinion. It was forced to do so, moreover, in such a way as not to

antagonize the Arab states. Mr. Bevin's solution was to make it clear to the whole world that he was yielding to superior force.

On present showing he still regards himself as an honest broker for the Arabs in their dealings with the modern world. This used to be Tory policy. It is the measure of Bevin's personal failure that he forced the Tories into opposition. If his own party has made no serious effort to replace him, it cannot be said to trust him any longer.

But having said this, one reverts once more to the abiding realities: Arab weakness and irresponsibility, and the problem of turning Palestine from a storm center into an island of stability. British policy, since the collapse of the Turkish Empire, was based on the belief that the Arabs were destined to become the "political nation" of the Middle East, whose position would somewhat resemble that of the Magyar gentry-nation in old Hungary, with its oppressed non-Magyar peasant minorities who numerically outweighed the Magyar *Herrenvolk*. French control of Syria-Lebanon did not fit into this scheme, and so the French were got rid of. Zionism ceased to fit in when it became genuinely powerful, and an attempt was made to get rid of Zionism. Instead a Jewish state came into being, while the Arab League displayed a degree of military weakness and political irresponsibility that discredited it in the UN and elsewhere.

At the beginning of this year, Arab irresponsibility and Foreign Office miscalculation, by precipitating a crisis, brought the underlying dangers to light and forced a revision of policy. Towards such a revision the recognition of Israel was a first step, and one would have liked to think that the British government was beginning to envisage a policy of basing its position in the Middle East on good relations with the Jewish state. But so great a mental change is apparently not to be looked for at this early stage.